



SINKING OF HMAT WARILDA

HMAT Warilda (His Majesty's Australian Transport) was a 7713-ton vessel, built by William Beardmore and Company in Glasgow as the SS Warilda for the Adelaide Steamship Company. She was designed for the East-West Australian coastal service, but following the start of the First World War, she was converted into a troopship and later, in 1916, re-converted into a hospital ship. She spent a few months stationed in the Mediterranean before being put to work transporting patients across the English Channel. Between late 1916 and August 1918 she made over 180 trips from Le Havre to Southampton, carrying approximately 80,000 patients in all.

On 3 August 1918, she was transporting over 600 wounded soldiers from Le Havre to Southampton, together with crew and medical personnel, a total of 801 persons. Her white superstructure and large red crosses were intended to give her the protection of the International Committee of the Red Cross but as with a number of other hospital ships, such as the Centaur torpedoed during the war, Germany claimed the ships were also carrying arms.

The night was very dark, but the sea was smooth and visibility was about half a mile, so there could have been little difficulty in recognising that she was a hospital ship. At 01.35 a.m. Hans Kükenthal in command of the German U-boat UC-49 fired a single torpedo at the hospital ship. He had given no warning. The torpedo hit the ship aft on the starboard quarter, disabling the Warilda's starboard propeller; but the port engine could not be shut down because the engine room had been flooded, and the steering gear blown away, so the ship continued moving in a circle at about 15 knots, almost full speed. The escort ships tried to take it in tow, but failed. It was a situation that spelt catastrophe for launching lifeboats. The ship sank after about two hours. Over 100 of the wounded died, including many of those in the "Eye Ward" who were trapped in one of the lower decks due to the collapse of the main companionways.

In total 123 lives were lost, of which thirteen were Australian, including Lieutenant Alfred Hubert Moss of Smithfield, South Australia. On 28 July 1918 he was wounded in the left hand and thumb near Villers Bretonneux. He was in charge of one of the anti-tank guns. A piece of shrapnel hit him as he was leaning out of a window in an old house where he was billeted. The shrapnel burst almost in front of him catching his left hand and under his right eye. He had been standing with his hand on a clip of some cartridges, when a piece of shrapnel struck it, fired the ammunition and wounded his hand and face. As a result he was invalided to England on the hospital ship Warilda.